DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 130 176 CG 006 926

AUTHOR Lorton, Larry
TITLE Operant Control of Misbehavior: Counselor Intervention.
NOTE 6p.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Behavior Change; Behavior Problems; *Change Agents; *Counselor Role; Elementary Education; *Elementary School Counselors; *Intervention; *Operant Conditioning

ABSTRACT

The thesis presented in this paper is that elementary counselors can become the most important behavioral change agents in the school. The following discussion will support this proposition. First, certain aspects of behavior modification will be discussed. Second, trends in elementary school counseling will be reviewed and finally, a synthesis will be presented including a model around which an effective behavior change program can be built and instituted in your school or school system. (Author)

****
* Documents acquired by ERIC include many informal unpublished *
* materials not available from other sources. ERIC makes every effort *
* to obtain the best copy available. Nevertheless, items of marginal *
* reproducibility are often encountered and this affects the quality *
* of the microfiche and hardcopy reproductions ERIC makes available *
* via the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). EDRS is not *
* responsible for the quality of the original document. Reproductions *
* supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original. *
****

ED130176

OPERANT CONTROL OF MISBEHAVIOR: COUNSELOR INTERVENTION

Dr. Larry Lorton
Warren City Schools and
The University of Akron

INTRODUCTION

The thesis presented in this paper is that elementary counselors can become the most important behavioral change agents in the school. The following discussion will support this proposition. First, certain aspects of behavior modification will be discussed. Second, trends in elementary school counseling will be reviewed and finally, a synthesis will be presented including a model around which an effective behavior change program can be built and instituted in your school or school system.

OPERANT CONTROL

It goes without saying that few recent topics in education have stirred up the controversy as has behavior modification. An analysis of journal articles and discussions of one variety or another leads one to believe that part of the controversy stems from a paucity of knowledge and understanding of the principles of behavior -- even by so-called "experts." Further, some authorities have passed-off "How to ---" or cookbook analogies to hungry teachers and parents with sometimes disastrous results; fostering very negative attitudes toward behavior modification as a concept and practice. Such charlatans misrepresent, abuse, misuse and malign behavioral principles, but worse, mislead and prey on the unsuspecting. The systematic application of a body of principles toward behavioral control is not a simple matter but a very difficult task. Nothing is more dangerous than a little knowledge.

Behavior modification has been defined many ways. What it really means is helping bad kids be good. Every teacher desires to have classroom control -- not necessarily backs straight, hands folded on the desk type -- but control which fosters progressive, constructive, responsible, mentally healthy learning. But alas, seldom does such an Eden exist. Teachers are constantly embroiled with maintaining or exerting some restraints over certain children who prohibit such utopia. Thus, I prefer to use terms like classroom management, instructional strategies, behavior management or others which have the same connotation as behavior modification but which appear to be more palatable to more people.

CG 006 926

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY.

Furthermore, for our purposes it is really irrelevant whether one considers himself to be a directive or non-directive counselor; a Rogerian, Dreikerian, Glasserian, or Skinnerian; or whether one's bag is administering tests, handling lunch-room or playground, individual counseling, group counseling, parent conferences, or whatever. All "pure" approaches have some common elements between them, the most important of which may be that they are more or less systematic. In the final analysis it is their systematization which makes them effective. They all require the teacher to systematically, rationally, and comprehensively analyze his own behavior and how it may affect the children he teaches.

The operant model is preferred to others for several reasons. First, it doesn't get too excited about antecedent conditions surrounding the misbehaving child's background. The operant model doesn't disregard such things but merely asks that once all of these so-called "causal" factors are known, what can be done about them? Besides, many "good" kids come from home conditions very much like those of kids who misbehave.

Second, the terminology is fairly precise. Operant control techniques deal with observable phonomena. Indeed, a child may be hostile, for example, but every teacher I've questioned about how he or she knows a child is hostile ends up describing overt, observable behavior such as "picks on other kids," "smart mouth (which translated means he talks back to authority figures,)", etc. So, while behaviorists agree that descriptions of visceral feelings may be somewhat attractive, they lend themselves to a variety of interpretations and make them very difficult to systematically approach.

Third, by and large, experiments and programs using operant methods for behavior management reveal a high degree of success. To practicioners who have very little time to invest, maximizing benefits from time investments is very important. Operant control does this.

To be sure, some well meaning (but often unknowledgeable) persons have criticized operant control. Some say that operant conditioning doesn't consider the whole child -- that it is too simplistic. Skinner, to my knowledge, makes no claim otherwise. It is not a panacea, magic or omnipotent. It is, however, an approach which works better than other techniques and should be viewed in that light. People who make this criticism are probably the same ones who think we know a great deal more about the causes of human behavior than we really do.

Some say that the application of a psychology of reinforcement is bribery. Some will apparently strive to absurdity to make a point. By definition, a bribe is something offered to someone to induce him to behave dishonestly. By logical extension of this argument do we define good behavior or school work as dishonest?

Operant conditioning is authoritarian or at least non-democratic. This argument poses a very special consideration because the explanation of differences between behaviorists and non-behaviorists on this point requires terms not clearly defined. The assumption of this position is that something akin to "free will," "freedom," "needs," "interests," "creativeness" must reign for a child to grow properly. The fact of the matter is that even the anti-behaviorist establishes constraints and he arranges certain consequences for certain responses. Only his unawareness of what he does prevents him from recognizing his use of the principles of operant conditioning.

Finally, operant control is viewed as immoral, unethical, or unpalatable in that it manipulates children much as puppets on a string -- molded and formed and at the total control of the string-puller; that it is mechanistic, cold and non-humanistic. Such balderdash! Properly used operant control is quite the opposite -- very warm and intimate; feeling and sensitive; and definitely humanistic (whatever that means). Teachers don't operate on children they operate on reinforcing stimuli. The child's repertoire of responses are not diminished, he merely learns that certain behaviors have more desirable consequences than others and he merely becomes predisposed to respond in ways which are pleasant and reinforcing. Desired responses are emitted not elicited. Unlike classical conditioning where specific responses follow specific stimuli, operant conditioning proceeds on the principle that responses occur as a result of consequences or reinforcing stimuli. Thus, operant conditioning is response-stimulus psychology not the stimulus-response psychology out of the classic mold. Operant control is stimulus control not response control. This is a very important distinction.

THE ELEMENTARY COUNSELOR

It will not be necessary to detail the trends in elementary counseling. It will suffice to say that in reality or in practice elementary counseling continues to fall short of the academic models so often studied while striving for certification. For years teachers were counselors. The disease model of the Child Guidance Movement of the 20's never really dealt successfully with helping teachers relate the identification of a child's basic problems to his inability to learn Dolch's list of basic sight words.

While the Child Study Movement of the 30's did an excellent job of clearly defining the teacher's role as focusing on the "whole child", it never did define "whole child".

The Child Development Movement of the 40's and 50's while recognizing that personal growth and adjustment were at least as important as academic achievement, merely substituted chaos for rigidity and found that some children thrived in it and some did not.

Finally, from the 50's until the present, specialists have been seen as the means to enable schools to fulfill their tasks. One of these specialist was the counselor but even today this role is not clearly defined. In many cases the role of guidance has long been forgotten and we find ourselves working with the deviant 15 per cent. A euphemism for elementary counselor often is administrative assistant in charge of attendance, playgrounds, lunchroom, instructional media, and discipline. These are important responsibilities to be sure -- but not as proper tasks of the counselor. The crux of the problem lies in the fact that while the counselor does all sorts of non-counseling activities, the principal's office continues to become a sardine-can of referrals and mis-behaviors continue to disrupt learning in the classrooms.

Can counselors fulfill a function which justifies the expenditure for their specialized competence and effect changes in pupil behavior? The answer to these questions is, "Yes."

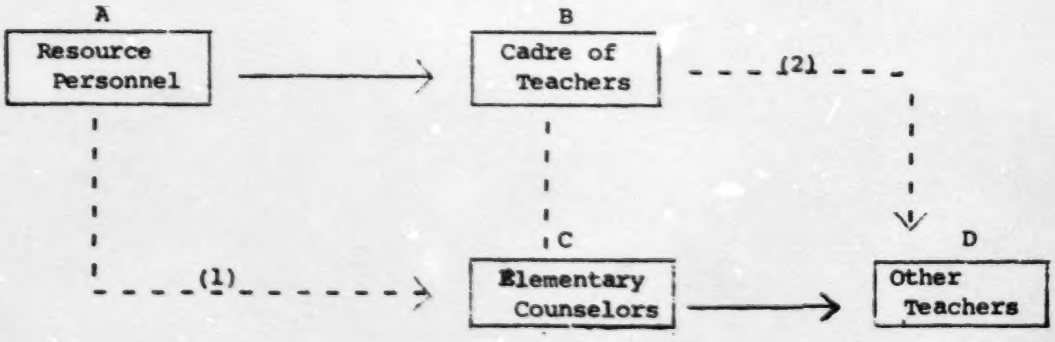
SYNTHESIS AND COUNSELOR MODEL

Most counseling time and energies in behalf of behavior change are expended as reactions to problems after the fact. Such counseling may be referred to as post-hoc.

The premise upon which the following model is built requires "getting ahead" of misbehavior. It would be preventive counseling rather than treatment and, further, it would involve teachers not pupils. Essentially the program would involve helping teachers acquire behavior management skills. The result would be the elimination of most misbehaviors which now tax teachers' patience, use up counselors energies, and drain principals' time.

It would require that counselors become retrained and experienced in achieving success in stimulus control techniques. In other words, the counselor would become a behavior change agent by intervening directly in the teaching - learning process. If teachers can be taught to create classroom climates conducive to proper behavior, normal problems would largely disappear.

Schematically, the model would look like the following:



Step I. It requires the selection of flexible, creative, bright, successful teachers. These teachers would become the cadre (B).

Step II finds these teachers going through a series of workshops (On-the-job-training) in which they acquire and practice the skills and principles of operant control. This workshop will be handled by persons skilled in this approach (A).

Step III requires the active participation of the elementary counselors in the workshop. Along with special materials and instruction (1) they add a comprehensive dimension to the workshop as resource persons, small group leaders, classroom observers and consultants.

Step IV finds the counselors conducting further workshops with additional teachers (D). The teachers in the original group then become resource personnel consultants and group leaders for further workshops (2).

Following the initial financial obligation to a behavior management specialist (A) costs are relatively very small. Even starting very small, say, with just 2 counselors and 10 teachers the impact would be felt very quickly. The success I have had has been extremely great (as seen by the transparencies).

It is essential that two carefully controlled steps be taken. First, the original resource person by truly skilled and knowledgeable in his field. Whatever costs incurred initially to get a high calibre person are quickly rewarded. You don't have to travel as far as you might suspect to find such a person.

Second, since the original group of teachers become future teachers of teachers it is important that they are carefully chosen. Honest, open, candid discussions during workshop sessions are essential and these persons must be sensitive and supporting their colleagues.

<u>Operant conditioning is a powerful tool</u> -- not magic -- and can be grossly abused with sometimes tragic consequences. The workshop must be carefully structured with a great deal interaction, encouragement, and support.

Under normal circumstances, any teacher can reduce his or her behavior problems by 90%. One only has to extend this fact to a whole building to see what it means to you as counselors and the principal.